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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001995

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM PHUM BA POL

SUBJECT: SUNNI ISLAMISTS NET GAINS IN BAHRAIN'S SECOND ROUND, NO MAJORITY FOR THE OPPOSITION

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶11. (C) Nearly 70% of Bahrain's registered voters in runoff districts participated in the second round of polls December 12. There were reports of minor skirmishes and journalists being harassed at a few poll stations, but overall voting proceeded peacefully. Early indications from the Election Monitoring Joint Committee (EMJC) were that the High Commission for Elections introduced an EMJC recommendation that general polling center election officials announce tallies prior to moving the ballot boxes to the governorate-level supervisory centers. Sunni Islamists gained all four seats they were contesting in the runoffs, leading Shia political society Al Wifaq gained one of two seats it was contesting, and liberal, secular Al Waad society failed to win a single seat, although one additional independent oppositionist won his race. End summary.

Heavy Turnout, (Mostly) Calm Polling

¶12. (SBU) Official election spokesperson Ahdeya Ahmed announced December 3 that the initial tally of voter participation showed that the turnout was 69% in districts holding second-round runoffs. There were reports of minor skirmishes outside some polling centers at which opposition candidates were competing. There were no reports that any of these skirmishes prevented voters from reaching the poll centers. Similarly, there were reports of security personnel harassing journalists and photographers, especially at the general polling centers. An unofficial observer from Al Wifaq was reportedly temporarily detained by military police at the general center next to the Bahrain Defense Forces Hospital after he was seen taking photos of military staff who voted at the center. The photos he took were reportedly erased and he was released.

¶13. (C) Although a more in-depth account of polling is forthcoming from the EMJC on the December 2 vote, initial indications are that the High Commission for Elections heeded the EMJC suggestion for increased transparency at the ten general polling centers. Bahrain Human Rights Society Deputy Secretary General and EMJC organizer Dr. Abdulla Al Derazi

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told Poloff December 3 that from the limited reports from EMJC volunteers that he had seen, election officials at the general centers released vote tallies to observers and candidate representatives prior to moving the ballots to the five governorate supervisory centers for consolidation with tallies from other general centers. Arabic daily Al Wasat

reported that some of the general centers had a high volume of voters, including large numbers of naturalized Bahrainis and military personnel.

Sunni Islamists Sweep, Waad Hit Hard

¶4. (SBU) The three remaining Al Minbar political society (Muslim Brotherhood) candidates and the single remaining Al Asala (Salafi) candidate all were victorious in their runoff races December 2, bringing the number of MPs in the Sunni Islamist bloc to 12, the same as there were in the previous parliament. Al Minbar has seven seats and Al Asala holds five. Half of these MPs (three Al Minbar and three Al Asala) took six of the eight Muharraq seats. Four others are in the Central Governorate while the Northern and Southern Governorates each have one. Arabic daily Al Watan reported December 3 that three of the newly elected independent MPs have approached Al Asala to request that they be included in its parliamentary bloc. Al Asala has reportedly said it will look into the request, and Al Watan sources say it will likely accept the new MPs.

¶5. (SBU) The three remaining candidates from Al Waad political society were all defeated in their respective races. In a scenario reminiscent of the Salah Ali/Munira Fakhro race, Al Waad candidate Abdulrahman Al Nuaimi had a significant lead (more than 700 votes) in votes cast in the district polling center, but the count from the general centers was 1,546 to 392 in favor of Al Nuaimi's incumbent competitor Isa Abul Fateh, who ended up with 53% of the overall vote. Al Wifaq gained one additional seat in the parliament as Sayed Mekki Hilal won his race against his competitor, who was also an Al Wifaq supporter running as an independent. However, Al Wifaq candidate Mahdi Abu Deeb lost

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to Al Minbar candidate Ibrahim Al Hadi in the only runoff race that pitted a Shia Islamist against a Sunni Islamist. Liberal independent candidate Abdulaziz Abul, who received support from Al Wifaq and Al Waad societies, was elected easily, receiving 64% of votes cast in the district, thus becoming the only Sunni opposition MP in the new parliament.

The "Independent" Question

¶6. (C) In the 40-seat parliament, there are now 17 members from the Al Wifaq bloc and 12 members from the Sunni Islamist bloc, leaving 11 independent MPs, all of whom are Sunni. Liberal oppositionist Abul will ally with Al Wifaq, and incumbent Sunni Islamist Jasim Al Saeedi will ally with Al Minbar and Al Asala. Council of Representatives Speaker Khalifa Al Dhahrani, although careful to maintain his objectivity, is close to Sunni Islamists. Of the eight remaining, all can be considered pro-government, but not all will see eye-to-eye with the Sunni Islamists. Three are incumbents - two from the pro-government "Independent bloc" and the third the sole survivor of the "Economic bloc" - both from the previous parliament. Another Independent is Adel Al Asoomi, a businessman who has ties to the Prime Minister, who is also the chairman of his area's charity fund that seeks to bring government projects to the area. The first woman in parliament, Latifa Al Qa'oud, is also pro-government, but is not likely to be close to the Islamists on either side. Less is known about the remaining three except that they will also support government proposals and will likely oppose opposition proposals that the government does not support.

EU Comment on Round One

¶7. (SBU) The Council of the European Union issued a press

statement November 29 about the first round of voting (forwarded to the Embassy December 3) in which it welcomed the parliamentary elections held in Bahrain. The statement read, "The higher turnout compared to the previous elections held in 2002 shows that the Bahraini people have embraced the importance of the electoral process in developing a democratic state. The EU is convinced that the elections have further consolidated the democratic process in the Kingdom of Bahrain."

Influence from Sunni MP Clerics

¶ 8. (SBU) Sunni Islamist MPs Mohamed Khalid and Jasim Al Saeedi were in Muharraq December 1, delivering pre-election Friday sermons. Mohamed Khalid spoke out against the alliance between Al Waad and Al Wifaq and encouraged voters to support Sunni Islamist candidates. He said that the Sunni Islamist bloc would not allow Al Waad and Al Wifaq to look into the Ministries of Defense and Interior's portfolios and budgets. Khalid was reportedly interrupted by two attendees when he began to impress upon worshippers the importance of voting for particular candidates in the runoff elections, a step preachers are not supposed to take.

The Scene at the Polls

¶ 9. (C) Although official participation statistics show only a very slight decline from the previous week's numbers, Emboffs observed a generally more placid environment while touring seven polling centers, perhaps because only eleven (of 40) districts held second-round parliamentary runoff elections. (Eight others held runoffs for municipal council seats.) In a repeat of the previous week, and in violation of the 2006 election law, partisans of the various candidates handed out campaign literature to passers-by (all campaign activity was supposed to cease 24 hours before the start of voting the morning of December 2) and campaign posters were present well inside of the required 200-meter perimeter around the stations. Many of the candidates themselves were physically present, standing immediately outside the entrances to the centers in several of the centers. At one center, the two competing parliamentary campaigns seemed to be engaged in a battle for voters' stomachs - both had tables set up distributing appetizers, sweets, and hot and cold drinks.

¶ 10. (C) Candidates arranged for other prominent politicians, including those who had won their elections the previous

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week, to visit the centers to generate excitement. Sunni Islamist MP Shaikh Adel Al Moawada paid visits in support of Independent Isa Abul Fateh and Al Minbar's Nasser Al Fadhal and spent time conversing with supporters in a display of personal politics. (Both candidates won.) Al Wifaq Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman visited Al Waad candidate

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Ibrahim Sharif and attracted television crews and a knot of supporters and hangers-on. Partisans of Sharif's competitor Abdulrahman Bumjeed loudly chanted their candidate's name close to the cameras in an attempt to add their voice to the footage.

¶ 11. (C) Despite reports of scattered run-ins between various groups at some of the polling stations, Emboffs observed mostly calm and quiet scenes during their tour, with only a minimum number of security personnel present at the stations. The only exception was the center in the Muharraq district hosting the runoff between Abul Fateh and Al Waad's Abdulrahman Al Nuaimi. There were approximately 150 regular police and (unarmed) community police in front of the center,

including a group of 15 standing right at the front entrance.

The security personnel had set up traffic barricades and were diverting vehicle traffic from entering the street fronting the building. They did allow vehicles carrying handicapped and elderly voters to drive up to the entrance. Security did not prevent anyone from entering the area on foot but asked those lingering in the area to move outside the barricades.

¶12. (C) The Central Governorate runoff between Al Minbar's Ibrahim Al Hadi and Al Wifaq's Mahdi Abu Deeb, the political societies with the largest representation in parliament, reportedly sparked some pushing and shouting between the two sides. During Emboffs' visit, each candidates' supporters were squeezed into the parking lot and on the sidewalk outside the polling station. There was a lot of foot and vehicle traffic with people holding signs and flags, and both candidates stood outside the center greeting voters upon their arrival. But actions that would have resulted in some fights at a typical high school football game, including waving signs in the faces of members of the opposing camp, were either tolerated or ignored with generally good humor.

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